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“Casting aside that fictitious self.”: Deciphering Female Identity in *The Awakening*

By

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A Thesis

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Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences

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## **I. Introduction**

Kate Chopin’s female protagonists have long since fascinated literary critics, raising serious questions concerning the influence of nineteenth-century female gender roles in her writing. Published in 1899, *The Awakening* demonstrates the changeability of the various representations of woman. In the nineteenth century, the subject of women may be divided into two categories: the True Woman and the New Woman. The former were expected to “cherish and maintain the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Khoshnood et al.), while the latter sought to move away from hearth and home in order to focus on education, professions, and political and/or social reform. Both categories of women point to the socially constructed ideas surrounding femininity in the late nineteenth century. In her highly influential work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues:

The very subject of woman is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of “the subject” as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. (2)

*The Awakening* coincided with a proliferation of magazines that helped craft and define the social roles and expectations of the nineteenth-century woman. However, since the subject of woman does not signify one common identity, issues concerning differences in religion, class, and ethnicity arise, resulting in exclusionary practices within nineteenth-century society. The problem with endeavoring to construct the True Woman or the New Woman lies in the inability to negotiate these multiple intersecting identities, and in the failure to combine them into one unifying concept. Thus far, critics remain divided when it comes to Edna Pontellier's "awakening;" however the general consensus views her suicide as a failure to conform to either the True Woman or the New Woman identity. One critic argues that the "hegemonic institutions of the nineteenth century required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood...with little opportunity for individuality" (Gray 53)<sup>1</sup>. However, while it is true that opportunities for women were limited in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the New Woman, an identity that manifested itself through the development of women's social clubs, the creation of ladies' magazines, etc., gave women the ability to step outside of traditional domestic roles. Edna, in an attempt to experiment with the roles of both the True Woman and the New Woman (the former embodied by Adèle Ratignolle, the latter by Mademoiselle Reisz), does not fit into either category. Nevertheless, this is not due to a failure on her part to conform. It is instead a triumph in that, right before her death, she eventually manages to live outside of the power structures that exist in order to shape and restrict female identity. Another critic explains that the novella is not simply about repression, but is instead:

a novel about a woman whose shaping culture has, in general, refused her right to speak out freely; this is, moreover, a culture that construes a woman's self-expression as a violation of sexual "purity" and a culture that has denied the existence of women's libidinous potential altogether—has eliminated the very *concept* of sexual passion for "normal" women. (Wolff 6)<sup>2</sup>

While it is true that nineteenth-century American women were not permitted to express their sexuality (nor was it believed that they possessed sexuality at all), they did hold the right to speak out freely against fictitious gender roles and sexist male ideology in women's magazines and journals. Wolff's argument, however, implies the existence of a "normal" woman, or a common subject that denotes "woman." Finally, another critic posits that Edna's death at the end of the novella serves as an "example of what can happen to a protagonist whose unwillingness to continue dedicating herself to any of the available social roles leads her to abandon all of them in favor of an...elusive freedom [associated] with...idyllic childhood" (Ramos 147)<sup>3</sup>. While Ramos sees Edna's unwillingness to dedicate herself to any of the available nineteenth-century social roles because she favors the idea of freedom associated with a so-called "idyllic childhood," it is far more likely that her inability to conform to a socially constructed female identity (be it the identity of the True Woman or the New Woman) stems from the impossibility of overcoming religious, class, and ethnic barriers.

This thesis will argue that while articles and images published in magazines and journals during the late nineteenth century, such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *The Delineator*, and the *North American Review*, helped produce the "cultural values and

ideals against which...Edna Pontellier was measured and found wanting” (Walker 140), the social constructions of the True Woman and of the New Woman were still restrictive despite their seemingly opposite ideologies. Furthermore, Edna’s suicide did not indicate a failure on her part to conform to one identity or another. Instead, Edna triumphs at the end of the novella through her dismissal of either constructed female identity. Though her religious background, class, ethnicity, and sexuality precluded the possibility of her ever coming to embody the morals of the True Woman, as Adèle Ratignolle does, and though she never quite manages to succeed in becoming a New Woman, like Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna transcends these limiting categories of woman, eventually freeing herself from oppression in the final moments before her implied death. Like the contrasting identities, the setting of the novella is divided: the first half takes place in Grand Isle, where Edna befriends Adèle Ratignolle, the exemplary True Woman. The second half traces Edna’s friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz—a spinster, though a fiercely self-sufficient New Woman—along with her attempts at becoming independent. Even the novel itself, with its interesting split in representation of women causes the reader to ask: is this a New Woman novel or a True woman novel? Did Chopin mean it to be one or the other? Did she simply intend to write a study of women in her era? Or is it an examination of an empty marriage?

## **II. Kate Chopin: New Woman or True Woman Writer?**

Critical reception of Chopin’s *The Awakening*, according to Ann Heilmann, was largely negative. Likewise, according to Emily Toth, the majority of 1899 reviewers

viewed Edna Pontellier as a "...selfish wife and mother who not only does not appreciate her good husband, but she also rebels in the worst possible way—by taking a lover or two" (209). These negative reviews were likely the opinions of the upper class, and even more likely, the opinions of men. Chopin's closest friends, however, consisted of women, and the more literary ones rose to her defense of the novel. Anna L. Moss, clubwoman and long-time friend, "...wrote to Chopin that the reviews showed "on the whole, as much discrimination as one could expect from such sources." To Moss, *The Awakening* was delicate, charming, true to life and much too good for the reviewing public" (Toth 224). Toth also explains that male critics, as the ones who controlled editing and publishing at that time, "would never accept her vision of women's ambitions and passions, nor did they even notice her celebration of women's friendships. None of them noticed Edna's learning about herself, gaining her trust in her own voice, in a world of women" (226). She notes that almost no one praised Chopin for writing about the fascinating subject of how women think with intelligence and maturity. Chopin herself chose to respond to her critics in an ironic swipe in *Book News*, explaining that:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late.

St. Louis, MO., May 28, 1899. Kate Chopin. (Toth and Seyersted 296).

This humorous response, like Chopin herself, speaks to the quick-witted and outspoken version of the author that many modern readers identify with today. Chopin, with her sarcastic jab at the critics who misunderstood the novel entirely, was unapologetic. This begs the question: was she a New Woman writer, or a True Woman writer? Or was she something else entirely?

While exploring Chopin's vocation as a writer in the nineteenth century, Ann Heilmann recognizes that, in its quest for female self-determination, "*The Awakening* aligns itself with nineteenth-century female traditions of writing, in particular the Anglo-American fiction of the New Woman" (89). She does not, however, view Chopin as a New Woman writer. These writers, she argues, tended to engage in fantastic plots (prostitution, madness, STDs, etc.) in order to explore feminist themes, while the less explicit writers "...created strong-willed, single-minded and resourceful heroines who, like the later New Woman characters, chafed against the restrictions imposed on their lives but, unlike them, sought to address inequities covertly" (89-90). Heilmann places Chopin somewhere in the middle, claiming that the propagandist tone of much of New Woman fiction would not have appealed to her. The reason for this, she argues, lies in the fact that Chopin was never a member of any feminist organization<sup>4</sup>. While I agree that Chopin occupied an ambiguous position regarding whether or not she could be considered a New Woman writer, I disagree with Heilmann on this front. As Toth explains, "In *At Fault*, Chopin satirises some recognizable pompous and silly St Louis characters, including clubwomen—although Chopin herself was a charter member of the scholarly and progressive Wednesday Club; she resigned from the club in 1892 but

remained friends with most of the women” (21). To state then, that Chopin was never involved in feminist organizations simply isn’t true<sup>5</sup>. Clearly, Kate Chopin’s close relationships with women shaped her and her writing from an early age.

Growing up, Kate O’Flaherty was raised by her mother and grandmother after losing her father at a young age. Later, she was educated by the nuns at Sacred Heart Academy<sup>6</sup>. Because of the profound influence these women had on her, she had “little opportunity to form traditional notions about marriage and submissive wives” (Toth 14). The impact these women had on her life informs her writing, which more often than not features nontraditional women with nontraditional views on marriage and motherhood. In 1894, Chopin found in Josephine Redding an editor who would publish some of her most ‘radical’ and ‘subversive’ stories. Redding, who headed a new magazine called *Vogue*, was “...an eccentric independent woman who believed that society ladies would appreciate ironic and pithy revelations about women’s lives and secret thoughts” (Toth 21). *Vogue* ended up publishing several of Chopin’s short stories, including “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” a story about a woman who saves money for her children, but ends up spending the money (and her entire day) on herself, and “The Story of an Hour,” a story about a woman who thinks her husband has perished, but then later dies herself when she sees him walk through the door. Her friends believe it to be shock, but the woman’s inner dialogue reveals her happiness with her new freedom, and her heartbreak when finding she remains trapped in her marriage. Both stories reveal women who want independence from their husbands and children.

*Vogue* enabled Chopin to be a social critic, something it seemed she had been doing privately already. She frequently made observations concerning those in society, and wrote down those thoughts in her journals. On May 4, 1895, after publishing *Bayou Folk*, she wrote:

I want the book to succeed. But how immensely uninteresting some “society” people are! That class which we know as Philistines. Their refined voices, and refined speech that says nothing—or worse, says something which offends me. (2-3/179-180).

Just four years before she published *The Awakening*, it was clear that Chopin was a fiercely autonomous and outspoken individual<sup>7</sup>, much like her character Mademoiselle Reisz, and much like who Edna Pontellier wished she could be. This journal entry also shows a private side of Chopin that differed immensely from her public self: a woman who portrayed herself as a mother who wrote as an unserious hobby. Undoubtedly, the entry shows that she spent a great deal of time thinking about herself as a professional writer, much like Edna spends a great deal thinking about herself as a professional artist.

Kate Chopin and Edna Pontellier share more than a desire to create art as a means to make money. They also share an experience marked by personal growth. On May 22, 1894, Chopin wrote:

If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth.

But I would take back a little wisdom with me; it would be the spirit of perfect acquiescence. (11/183).

This remarkable insight into the mind of Kate Chopin shows readers that like Edna, she experienced her own awakening years before writing Mrs. Pontellier's story. Unlike Edna, Chopin missed her mother and husband dearly after their deaths. It is interesting to note the language from this passage mirrors Edna's own thoughts concerning her children. She too, expresses giving things up for her family when she tells Madame Ratignolle that she would give up the 'essential,' but not herself. Chopin too, would give up the essential, but is unwilling to completely give up her personal growth and her new identity (she would compromise, however). It is also apparent that the inspiration for Lèonce and Edna Pontellier came to Chopin through her association with French painter Edgar Degas, who spent some time in New Orleans from 1872-1873. Toth writes that "Degas's New Orleans neighbours included a pompous husband named Leonce, whose wife did not love him." She also notes that "Degas's Parisian friends included a painter who gave up her art to marry and move to the provinces, where she was sad and unfulfilled. Her name was Edma Pontillon" (17). Evidently, Chopin already had the inspiration for the characters of *The Awakening* years before she needed them.

Kate Chopin and Edna also share a love of female friendships: Chopin's mentors were mostly women<sup>8</sup>, and Edna's growth was the product of her education from both Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle. According to Toth and Seyersted, the private Kate Chopin "...loves nature and warm friendships, and recalls with deep, raw emotion the "animal sensation" of touching her firstborn child (May 22)—a passage that

anticipates Edna's thoughts about childbirth" (177). It is very likely that Chopin wrote herself into *The Awakening*, though not only through its protagonist. Though she resembles Mademoiselle Reisz in that she was a woman who made a living on her own after her husband's death, she is also a 'mother-woman,' much like Adèle Ratignolle. Surely, Chopin was deeply invested in the lives of women, and the novel is clearly a study of such.

### III. The True Woman / Edna and Adèle Ratignolle

Set during a summer vacation at Grand Isle, the first half of the novella highlights the various representation of the True Woman, or the woman whose sole occupation included embodying the ideal mother and wife. The strongest differences that set Edna apart from the True Woman include her religious, class, and ethnic background. Butler suggests that "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (4-5). Adèle Ratignolle, the quintessential True Woman<sup>9</sup>, is one such example of a woman whose gender has become inseparable from her role as a mother and wife. Her relationship with her husband is portrayed as "ideal": "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has ever been accomplished on this sphere it was surely their union" (66). The Ratignolles are happy because they have no problem accepting the roles constructed for them through a patriarchal, hierarchical society. Since they were born into this society, they have no

reason to question it. Edna, on the other hand, having ties to her father's Mississippi plantation and a childhood home in the "blue-grass" state, is described as being an "American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution" (5). While apparently explicating Edna's multiple identities, the fact that part of her identity (in this case her French identity), is diluted shows how an important part of her is missing compared to the other characters in the novel. At this point, she doesn't have a clear sense of who she is. The dilution of her French ancestry contrasts strongly with that of her Creole husband, her Creole friend Adèle, and her Creole love interest Robert, the twenty-six-year-old son of Madame Lebrun: "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" (10). Thus, the novella immediately separates Edna from the other characters at Grand Isle. Described in "A People Who Live Amid Romance," a December 1896 article in *Ladies' Home Journal*, Ruth McEnery Stuart<sup>10</sup> sheds light on the Creole people<sup>11</sup>:

He is American-born, but he is French—which is to say he is Creole. And is he not American? Well, yes, afterword—maybe. But first he is a Frenchman. Then—? Well, after that he is a Louisianian—and a Democrat—and a Roman Catholic, of course. (160-161)

All of the complex, multitudinous and intersecting identities of the Creole people contrast with Edna's: she is American, but she is not quite as French. She is not from Louisiana, but from Kentucky. She is not Roman Catholic, she is Protestant<sup>12</sup>, and although she attends Catholic mass with her husband and children, she feels stifled when trying to belong to a society that is not her own. When asked about her religious background, she

explains to Adèle that “during one period of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until—until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit” (19). Evidently, religion is the first identity in the novella that Edna decides not only to let go of, but to challenge as a form of representation of her character.

In addition to not sharing a similar religious background, ethnicity or class with Adèle Ratignolle, the quintessential True Woman, Edna does not share her love of marriage and motherhood. Chopin’s narrator explains that Adèle “had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her ‘condition’” (10). Edna on the other hand, is described as “not a mother-woman” (9), and as being “fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way” (21), which sets her apart from the traditional True Woman. Her uneven/impulsive behavior provides evidence that she attempts to exemplify the True Woman, but she isn’t able to keep up appearances. Even her marriage to Lèonce Pontellier is depicted as being “purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as fate” (21). Up until this point in the novella, Edna’s identification as a mother and as a wife appears to have been chosen for her, and thus not critical to her journey in defining herself. In May of 1899, Helen Watterson Moody published an article titled “The True Meaning of Motherhood” in *Ladies’ Home Journal*<sup>13</sup>. In it, she sought to highlight the key differences between maternity and motherhood:

Mere maternity is no special credit to a woman, since it implies only instinct; true

motherhood always must be her special bright and sparkling crown, for this implies a knowledge and recognition of the fact that the great purpose of the institution of marriage and of the family is not the preservation of the race alone, but the elevation of the individual. (156)

In addition to exemplifying the virtues of the True Woman, Adèle follows this description of the true mother. Adèle is perfectly content embracing motherhood, and embracing her role as the metaphorical queen of her domestic life with her husband and offspring. She accepts her position in life, so she does not feel restricted as Edna does. Already having three children and a loving marriage, Chopin's narrator describes Adèle in the moments preceding the birth of her fourth child in similar divine language:

Madame Ratignolle was in the salon, whither she had strayed in her suffering impatience. She sat on the sofa, clad in an ample *peignoir*, holding a handkerchief tight in her hand with a nervous clutch. Her face was drawn and unnatural. All her beautiful hair had been drawn back and plaited. It lay in a long braid on the sofa pillow, coiled like a golden serpent. (129)

Dressed in a beautiful night gown, Adèle once again prepares to become a mother. Her unnatural appearance (although drawn from the pain of childbirth) nearly likens her to a celestial being, while her blonde hair, compared to that of a golden serpent, affords her the regal appearance of a queen. This reverential characterization, so similar to the language applied in Moody's depiction of true motherhood, offers insight into the importance of domesticity in the life of Adèle and the True Woman. Wolff argues that unlike men, who were able to "possess" their sexuality and "experience their sex

directly,” females were “allowed access to sexuality only indirectly—as a subsidiary component of the desire for children” (8). According to this line of thinking, sexuality becomes intertwined with motherhood, and maternalism allows Adèle to become a sexual being and enjoy sexual relations with her husband. However, motherhood and sexuality don’t appear to be related in the novella; they appear to be separate, since (after about 1849) “the medical establishment in America began to promulgate the view that normal females possessed no erotic inclinations whatsoever (and one cannot awaken something that does not exist)” (Griffin Wolff 3-4). Therefore, Adèle is not depicted as a sexual person because she has children. As a woman who feels it is her duty to fulfill an obligation to her husband by producing offspring, her looks are not sexualized in the novella. In fact, she is consistently described in language suggesting purity:

Madame Ratignolle, more careful of her complexion, had twined a gauze veil about her head. She wore doeskin gloves, with gauntlets that protected her wrists. She was dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty as a greater severity of line could not have done. (17)

While considered a beautiful woman, Adèle’s looks are not overly sexualized. Even on the beach, her body is completely covered. She is described as wearing white, a color that nearly always implies purity/chasteness, and while her clothes protect her body from the sun, they also serve as protection for her virtue by preventing the wandering gaze of other men.

Conversely, Edna does not succeed in conforming to the morals and ideals of the True Woman. Early on in the novella, she is admonished by her husband for her “habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (6). Later, she is portrayed in opposition to the True Woman, for whom motherhood and marriage was privileged over almost all else: “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood” (9). Once again, Edna is alienated from Adèle and the other mothers; she does not conform. These so-called “mother-women,” or True Women, were “women who idolized their children worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). Edna, not willing to “efface” or erase her identity, once more uses religious imagery to set herself apart from the pious True Woman. Edna cannot compare to these “angel” women, because she does not share their beliefs. Additionally, wing imagery manifests itself again at the end of the novella, when Edna observes a “bird with a broken wing...beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (136). Closer inspection of these lines suggest that Edna is really the bird going down into the water, and if she is equated to a bird, it is evident that her broken wing, unlike that of a True Woman, could not ever bring her to identify solely as a dutiful and moral wife and mother.

Later on, Edna’s opinions on motherhood become more apparent, and it is evident that she does not share the values of the True Woman. During a trip to the beach with

Adèle, Edna tells her “I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (56). Edna does not feel that her role as a mother defines her whole identity. It is but a small part of herself, and again, a part that she would feel comfortable casting aside in pursuit of her own individual identity.

The summer at Grand Isle marks a pivotal moment for Edna, and her tenuous connection to Adèle and (by association) her connection to the True Woman is finally severed. Wading into the water for the first time alone, Edna desired to “swim out, where no woman had swum before,” although to her “unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome” (32-33). Ann Heilmann asserts that Edna’s first swim “...establishes her sense of self-ownership, physical, mental and spiritual, which in turn triggers two fundamental insights that determine her progression from disengaged wife to autonomous subject” (87). Clearly, during that first swim Edna is finally aware of the control she has over her own body—both in the water, and out—and she learns to assert control in other areas of her life. Later on in the evening after her swim, Lèonce Pontellier demands that his wife come inside. Something changes inside of her however, and she thinks: “Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire” (36). Instead of of complying, Edna becomes angry, telling him “I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you” (37). During this pivotal moment in the novel, Edna begins to take ownership of her

body, and will not submit her husband (or anyone), unless she chooses to do so. At this point, Edna desires more than the restrictive True Woman identity can afford her. She understands that to escape such a restrictive category, she must explore and push the invisible, culturally constructed barriers that confine her, which she begins to do when she returns to New Orleans at the end of the season and first half of the novella:

She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (47)

This shift in her attitude concerning her identity is noteworthy because in some ways, it allows her to become the True Woman and the New Woman at the same time. However, if she is simultaneously embodying both categories, it also stands to reason that she embodies neither. She hasn't quite mastered either identity, nor does she want to. She begins to see herself with different eyes at the very moment the setting of the novella shifts.

#### **IV. The New Woman / Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz**

The second half of the novella begins in New Orleans, and introduces the socially constructed life of the New Woman<sup>14</sup>. Heilmann defines the New Woman movement as being conceived of “...as the cultural and literary arm of first-wave feminist activism, with the underlying objective of many writers being the use of literature as a political tool for social change” (92). While it is unlikely that Chopin considered herself a New

Woman writer, as I have argued, it is very likely that she would have known and liked many New Women in her lifetime. Additionally, just as women's magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* helped aid the construction of the True Woman, periodicals such as the *North American Review* and *The Delineator* helped shape the emergence of the New Woman in nineteenth-century America. Butler argues that "the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women"<sup>15</sup> (2), and during Chopin's lifetime, women's magazines and journals seemed to function as representing women and their collective "identity". In March of 1894, Sarah Grand published "The New Aspect of the Woman Question"<sup>16</sup> in the *North American Review*. Tackling the issue of the changing discourses surrounding female identity, she explained that:

Women were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke, they began to whimper for they knew not what. They might have been satisfied at that time had not society...shaken them and beaten them and stormed at them until what was once a little wail became convulsive shrieks and roused up the whole human household. Then man, disturbed by the uproar...added his own old theories to the din, but, finding they did not act rapidly, formed new ones, and made and intolerable nuisance of himself with his opinions and advice. (271)

Grand's language directly implies the problem with society that is, a patriarchal society, shaping the identities of women, and reminds one of Edna's own awakening from her culturally constructed life, and her dissatisfaction in marriage and motherhood. Her sexuality too, becomes a part of her that she can no longer ignore. Lèonce Pontellier

functions in the novella as a man who becomes “disturbed” by the uproar Edna causes for him and his family. During a conversation with Doctor Mandelet, he complains that his wife has “some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women,” to which Mandelet responds that women “are not all alike,” and then asks whether or not she “has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?” Lèonce desperately replies that “she hasn’t been associating with any one. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she’s peculiar” (77). This significant exchange in the novella offers insight into nineteenth-century construction of female identity through that of the male gaze. Lèonce Pontellier has his own ideas concerning how his wife should behave, while Doctor Mandelet considers the implications of her behavior and wonders whether he can “classify” her by placing her in the category of the emerging New Woman. In Lèonce Pontellier’s case, as Edna’s husband, he ultimately forms his own opinion on the subject of women and while attempting to help or offer advice, eventually becomes a nuisance to her.

Before the end of the nineteenth century, increased “attention to women’s changing roles, their growing involvement in club work<sup>17</sup> and public affairs, the impact of that on their homes, their families and themselves, and articles on the meaning of feminism” (173) became featured topics in the pages of *The Delineator*. The magazine, from 1894<sup>18</sup> until the end of WWII, “helped shape constructs of the emerging New Woman and aided in altering women’s changing views of themselves” (168). Although

the magazine offered women a (slightly) positive, less restrictive role in society, it still put restraints on the subject of women and any other identities they might have wished to explore. Because a large part of the magazine's success relied on the changing roles of women and what Bland describes as the "gradual, though not total, move away from home and hearth into colleges, clubs and organizations, the professions, and into the large public arena of municipal reform during the so-called Progressive period" (165), many of the women in *The Awakening* show signs of exemplifying the ideals of the New Woman<sup>19</sup>.

In particular, Mademoiselle Reisz, an unmarried woman and accomplished pianist most closely fits the role of the New Woman. While some critics have argued that "Mademoiselle Reisz is a caricature of the 'ugly spinster' with more than a hint of the lesbian predator..." (Heilmann 98), none of her actions point to an interest in Edna beyond friendship. Her ambivalent curiosity concerning Edna's relationship with Robert instead points to a tacit rejection of the romantic. If anything, Reisz serves as a mentor to Edna—someone she can learn from and confide in. She is first described as being "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a bad temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (29). Mademoiselle Reisz, living alone as a self-sufficient artist, displays many of the constructed ideals of the New Woman: her art, intellect and sexuality especially stand out. When Edna informs her that she wishes to make a living through her painting, Mademoiselle Reisz asserts that "to be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one's own effort.

And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul... The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (75). The fact that an artist's gifts must not be acquired by one's own effort illustrates the idea that talent is innate. The subject of the artist, therefore, is neither a politically, socially or culturally constructed identity. Though not depicted as a sexual or desirable woman, Mademoiselle Reisz expresses her sexuality through her piano playing:

Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity... [she] had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde's song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing. (75)

Though not physically attractive or young, Mademoiselle Reisz overcomes this boundary through her musical abilities, which serve as a substitute for the New Woman's sexuality. Edna begins to exhibit these similar strong qualities as she moves away from her marriage and motherhood, and into the realm of art and sex. She begins painting portraits of Adèle, and continues her affair with Alcée Arobin. After her husband storms out of their house over an argument at dinner, Edna begins to push back against the institution of marriage: "Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it on the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (62). This moment elucidates another turning point for Edna, since it signifies for the first time in the novella that she truly recognizes her desire to be free from the confines of her marriage. Tension builds, and when "Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent.

She had resolved never to take another step backward” (67), and she doesn’t. While attempting to negotiate her own identity with that of the New Woman, Edna “was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (67).

Edna’s affair with Alcée Arobin is critical in her journey toward New Womanhood, even if she eventually abandons it. Alcée is described as “a familiar figure at the race course, the opera, the fashionable clubs” (86). He gambles, indicating he has less-than-savory vices, but he is also a part of upper class society, suggesting he is also charming—a potentially dangerous combination, as Edna eventually discovers. Her initial interest in Alcée begins when she joins him at the races. When he takes her home afterward, she thinks that she “wanted something to happen—something, anything, she did not know what” (87). Not fully ‘awakened,’ she doesn’t understand what her feelings mean. A few days later when she spends time alone with him, the “excitement came back upon her like a remittent fever. Her talk grew familiar and confidential. It was no labor to become intimate” (89). Here she recognizes that these unfamiliar feelings are a source of pleasure, so she decides to pursue them. As a result, she becomes close to him, despite her early uncertainty. Although she at first tries to convince herself that he means nothing to her, she eventually comes to realize that “his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand has acted like a narcotic upon her” (91). Despite her clear physical response to his touch, she still will not take ownership of her budding sexuality. His kiss is like a drug to her, and her reaction is chemical—one that she does not realize she is in control of. As their relationship

continues, she finally admits that he “sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (92). Finally, she accepts her sexual awakening, and that he is the cause. Because of this, she consents to his advances. When they get together, Edna feels that his kiss was “the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (98). She is in charge of her desire, as well as her body.

At this point in the novella, any remaining trace of the True Woman left in Edna vanishes, leaving behind an almost-but-not-quite New Woman in her wake. During her party to celebrate her upcoming single status, Chopin’s narrator explains that there was “something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” (105). Making the decision that she will indeed live alone, like Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna at once begins to embody the New Woman. Still trying to conform to this identity, she later declares to Robert “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (128). She proves that she is willing and able to acknowledge the freedom associated with her sexual nature. The party, which Heilmann explains is a “...carnavalesque feast with which Edna celebrates her freedom on her twenty-ninth birthday stages a symbolic over-enactment of the anarchic spirit that distinguishes the “free woman” from the wife” (95). While I agree that the dinner is symbolic of her new journey as a free and independent woman, she does not stay on this path. Despite claiming that she is free to give herself to

whomever she chooses, she eventually diverts from her path to New Womanhood, and, after the birth of Adèle's child (which she witnesses in extreme discomfort), tells Doctor Mandelet "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal...when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (132). Unlike Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna isn't willing to "trample," especially on the lives of her children. She has already resolved to leave her husband, and now her children. Doctor Mandelet, appearing to understand her plight, offers her advice:

"The trouble is," sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost. (132)

Doctor Mandelet comprehends (and has all along) that Edna is not a "mother-woman" or a True Woman, but is the first character to inform her that not being so isn't a failure. Essentially, he explains to her that the desire to become a mother, or become a wife, is a construct of society; a means for patriarchal systems of power to secure the continuation of the human race. As an enlightened doctor aware of a woman's sexuality, he invites her to come speak with him: "We will talk of things you never have dreamt of talking about before" (132). He wants to ease her emotional pain, however, now that Edna has expressed her desire to go her own way, it becomes evident that she no longer wishes to

exemplify the New Woman identity either. In the end, she chooses not to conform to any identity/social role offered to her.

## V. Conclusion

On June 2, 1894 Kate Chopin wrote an impression she had about a female acquaintance in her journal, in a way similar to the way she writes her female characters:

Mrs. Stone looks like a woman who accepts life as a tragedy and has braced herself to meet it with a smile on her lips. The spirit of the reformer burns within her... The condition of the working classes pierces her soul; the condition of women wrings her heart. "Work" is her watch word. She wants to work to make life purer, sweeter, better worth living. (16-17/185-186).

Chopin, as a keen observer of women, probably related to her friend on many levels: she too sought to make life better worth living through her work (in this case writing), just as Edna sought to make her life better through her art. It is probable that Chopin placed the women in her life (possibly even herself) into *The Awakening*. Her life's work included the study of the various manifestations of women, and the novel serves that purpose as well.

To understand her suicide, we need to return to the very beginning of the novella, when Lèonce Pontellier remarks to his wife: ""You are burnt beyond recognition;" he then proceeds to look at her "as one looks at a valuable piece of property" (2). A close inspection of this comment illustrates Edna's undecipherable identity before she begins

her journey of self-discovery. She is nothing more than an object, belonging to her husband, without the least bit of agency. Heilmann has argued that although Edna is able to strip away her old identity, she has no new identity that could enable her to live a life independent from her family. She claims throughout the novel, "...she experiments with two contrasting female roles exemplified by Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz—the passionate mother and the artist—but ultimately rejects both" (96)<sup>20</sup>. While I agree that she does reject both versions of womanhood, this does not mean that she lacks an identity—it just doesn't conform to that of the traditional True Woman or the progressive New Woman. By the end, Edna's meaningful fate at the end of *The Awakening* may be viewed as a failure to conform to the various politically, socially or culturally constructed nineteenth-century female identities, as some critics have argued. However, her decision at the end of the novella, to exist outside of a patriarchal power system that would place her into a restrictive category of being, suggests a triumph instead. Peter Ramos, for example, argues that Edna's "refusal finally to dedicate herself to an identity or creatively transform one for herself is a particular failure, one that ends in suicide" (148). However, he fails to take into account that her suicide isn't the result of a failure, but rather a victory against conforming to a suffocating construction of one or more female identities. According to Butler, feminist critique ought to "understand how the category of "woman," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (4), meaning that the categorization of women produced stifled women, such as Edna, and also restrained them. Nineteenth-century magazines both produced "ideal" categories of women, that is,

the True Woman and the New Woman. However, a level of restraint existed as well, since to operate outside of either of these categories of woman meant that one wasn't fulfilling a constructed "role." In an honest exchange with Alcée Arobin in the second half of the novella, Edna explains her conflicting feelings concerning her intersecting identities:

"One of these days," she said, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it," (97).

Edna is highly aware of the problem that arises when the subject of woman is constructed into an amalgamating, all-inclusive identity. She considers herself a 'wicked specimen' precisely because she does not conform, and when she finally does think about the implications of this problematic social construction, she makes the decision to live outside of it. In the final moments of the novella, and in the final moments of her life, Edna refuses to conform to any identity. She decides that she is not a mother, a wife, a lover, a Protestant, a True Woman nor a New Woman. She refuses all of it, and Chopin's narrator explains:

She put [her bathing suit] on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life stood naked in the open air, at

the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

(136)

Her movements at the end of the novella are purpose-driven. Unlike Adèle's protective clothing, Edna does not desire a protective covering of her body or virtue. By stripping off her bathing suit, she is stripping away all of her intersecting identities. She is naked, and she is also free, finally, for "the first time in her life."

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Gray also argues that the “female roles portrayed in *The Awakening* are rooted in an ideological system. Edna’s awakening allowed her to resist the various “interpellations” of the dominant patriarchal ideology and experiment with both alternative and oppositional roles” (54).

<sup>2</sup> Significantly, Wolff notes that “the true subject of *The Awakening* may be less the particular dilemma of Mrs. Pontellier than the larger problems of female narrative that it reflects; and if Edna’s poignant fate is in part a reflection of her own habits, it is also, in equal part, a measure of society’s failure to allow its women a language of their own” (12-13). I would further add that society’s real failure lies in its inability to create a stable, common identity for women. Edna, by the end of the novel, exists outside of a system of the patriarchal system of power that sought to control and categorize her.

<sup>3</sup> Ramos also notes that “Edna’s search for such an unrestrained, undefined and, ultimately, impossible state—a freedom from identity—ironically deprives her life of meaning (and finally life itself” (147). I would argue that her search is not so much impossible, but it is unsustainable. She can only swim so far out into the ocean, just as she can only exist without an identity for a short period of time.

<sup>4</sup> Heilmann argues that Chopin “took pains to distance herself from social and political feminism and emphasised her writerly preoccupation with the truthful representation of femininity” (92).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, many of Chopin’s lifelong clubwomen friends were both loyal and enthusiastic.

Toth writes:

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Nearly a decade after she had been one of its charter members, the Wednesday Club now had 250 members, all “women of brains, of wealth, or influence and undisputed power,” according to the newspaper. For the Club’s Reciprocity Day on November 29, nearly 400 women attended, the largest turnout in Chopin’s life. It was an “Afternoon with St. Louis Authors,” at which Kate Chopin was featured and honored. (228)

<sup>6</sup> Toth points out that Kate Chopin “...grew up in a matriarchy, where women handled their own money and made their own decisions, as did the nuns at the Sacred Heart Academy” (13).

<sup>7</sup> Toth and Seyersted note that Chopin specialized in the “...quick and surprising perception, and many of her “Impressions” are exactly that: thoughts about people she encounters.... She is exasperated both by do-gooders (social reformers) and by do-nothings” (176).

<sup>8</sup> Toth explains that “...she was tutored at home for two years by her great-grandmother, Victoire Charleville, who emphasized French and music and tales of rebellious St Louis women...[and] Mary O’Meara, gifted for composition in verse and prose” (15).

<sup>9</sup> The first depiction we receive from the narrator explains that “There were no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the by-gone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (9). The old words indicate that Adèle is indeed a True Woman, a category of woman that was slowly waning as an effect of the emergence of the New Woman.

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<sup>10</sup> McEnery Stuart also notes that "...one of the most distinguishing qualities of the Creole is his conservatism. His family traditions are of obedience and respect. It begins with his church and ends in his wine cellar. He cares not for protesting faiths or new vintages. His religion and his wines are matters of tradition" (161). The Creole traditions are foreign to Edna, and she cannot identify with them, which further alienates her from them.

<sup>11</sup> Walker points out that by stressing the "Creoles' sense of tradition and cultural conservatism, McEnery Stuart provides insight into the values of the society into which Edna has married and to which she remains something of an outsider" (141). Adèle, admonishing Robert for flirting with Edna, reminds him that "she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (23).

<sup>12</sup> In the novella Edna is Presbyterian. According to Griffin Wolff, "Edna's particular religious background could not have been chosen casually by Chopin, for a woman reared in this faith during the 1870s and 1880s (the years of Edna's youth) would have been preternaturally susceptible to the most crippling elements" (4). As such, many Presbyterians during the nineteenth century upheld the conservative views that wives were subordinate to husbands, and that women were the weaker "vessels." Griffin Wolff sees Edna's "awakening" as not only a sexual awakening, but a breaking free of those conservative religious ideals as well.

<sup>13</sup> Walker notes that "magazines intended primarily for women readers, such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Godey's*, offered advice on women's appearance, their social

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deportment, and their roles as wives and mothers” (141). I will push further and argue that such periodicals were intended primarily for True Women readers.

<sup>14</sup> Heilmann argues that *The Awakening* “...revolved around the key concerns of New Woman fiction—marriage, motherhood, women’s desire for a separate identity and bodily autonomy—and reconceptualises these through the metaphors of gestation, awakening, and sensual-spiritual epiphany” (93).

<sup>15</sup> Butler also notes that “rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (4). Edna’s anxiety over the stability of her identity is evident throughout the novella.

<sup>16</sup> Khoshnood et al. also cites to Grand, arguing that the protagonists in Chopin’s early fiction share some traits of the New Woman, and although they “may not represent the full-fledged manifestation of the New Woman’s attributes,” Chopin portrays them as “early versions that can promise fuller and more complex emergence in her later fiction” (1134-1135). I agree that *The Awakening* provides a richer example of the New Woman than in her earlier work.

<sup>17</sup> Beginning in 1898, prominent clubwoman Helen Winslow “almost single-handedly furthered the discussion in her monthly columns on “Club Women and Club Life”” (173).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Dwyer served as editor of *The Delineator* from 1894 until 1906. During his tenure, three “notable and path-breaking” series were introduced: “The Woman’s Colleges of the United States,” “Employments for Women,” and “The Social Code.” Bland notes that “in its move away from exclusive focus on fashion plates and clothing

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designs...*The Delineator* increasingly explored, through articles, fiction, and editorial comment, the activities and roles of a generation of “new women”” (170).

<sup>19</sup> Although she’s only briefly mentioned in the novella, perhaps the most overt reference to the New Woman lies in the depiction of one of Edna’s party guests:

There was a Miss Mayblunt, no longer in her teens, who looked at the world through lorgnettes and with the keenest interest. It was thought and said that she was intellectual; it was suspected of her that she wrote under a *nom de guerre* [assumed name]. She had come with a gentleman by the name of Gouvernail, connected with one of the daily papers...” (102).

Miss Mayblunt is an intellectual and writes under an assumed name, and the fact that she is accompanied by a man associated with the daily papers would suggest that she is, in all likelihood, a writer and contributor concerned with the changing roles of her sex.

<sup>20</sup> She also contradictorily argues that Edna’s suicide is a “...passionate assertion of her new-found identity and unconditional refusal to accept compromise: a rejection not of herself but of a social world that imposes moral imperatives on human desire” (89).

While she rightly states that her suicide is not a rejection of herself, she also claims that Edna has no identity, and it cannot go both ways. One cannot give up a self if one has no identity.

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